The Best Is Better When We're Together
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The Best Is Better When We're Together

by goldenraeofsun

Summary

Colleagues. Partners. Best friends.

At this point, Lois and Clark practically live in each other's pockets. Clark gallantly lends his bed to Lois whenever she sleeps over. Lois bought a comfier recliner once it became apparent he would never kick her out of her own bed. He has a mug in her kitchen cabinet. She has a toothbrush next to his bathroom sink.

Or, 5 times Lois or Clark sleeps over, and 1 time Superman does.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

“Maybe it’s my Daddy Issues showing,” Lois muses.

From her La-Z-Boy recliner, Clark chokes on the beer he’s been nursing for the past hour.

Lois swirls the dregs of her second homemade martini – extra olives, extra gin – in her hand. The world has gone all swirly, and Clark is a vague Kansan-shaped lump in the corner. She’d turned off most of the lights a few hours ago; they were doing nothing for her burgeoning headache, and she needed to power through her article.

She pressed the submit button on her next front-page expose exactly 19 minutes ago, and she fucking deserved a drink after nearly dying twice (*shut up, Clark, that third thing totally didn’t count*) and ruining her most comfortable pair of pumps running through the mud. After downing her first martini in record time, she doubled the gin and started to savor her hard-won second drink.

Hesitantly, Clark starts, “Do you want some water? I could get you some –”

“I mean,” Lois continues, ignoring Clark’s inane prattling, “obviously everyone and their goddamn brother knows about my… *thing* for Superman.”

Clark practically glows in the dark, his cheeks are so red. God, he’s such a prude.

Remind her why she likes him again?

Oh right, because he’s nice and the type of old-school gallant that seemed like a front to get into her pants until she saw him literally act the same way towards his ancient, half-blind, next-door neighbor, Mrs. Kowalski.

Lois spent their first six months working together giving him the cold-shoulder, scooping him at every opportunity possible (and some impossible ones because she’s damn good at her job) to drive him off. She had met his type, and they’d never gotten anywhere with her before, and she wasn’t going to give any ground now. But Clark was determined, and that determination was honestly what won her over in the end. Since, as it turned out, she *hadn’t* met Clark’s type before.

He never hounded her for a date. He asked her out exactly once, to a very safe coffee date - not even dinner – and didn’t sulk about it when

she let him down. He was a little quieter for the next week at work, but otherwise internalized whatever was going on behind those enormous glasses and didn't take it out on her.

Anyway, that was nearly five years ago now. He'd moved on, and Lois *clearly* set her sights on someone else.

"I think it's because he's unattainable," Lois continues.

Clark jumps up from his seat. "I'll go get you that water," he mumbles as he all but sprints to her kitchen.

Lois rolls her eyes to the ceiling, and if she had x-ray vision, would she see Superman soaring overhead, watching over Metropolis, protecting them all from harm?

"My dad's a general, you know," she says, raising her voice, so Clark can hear her. "Dragged us all over the country. Treated Lucy and me like his own mini platoon of two. Tough love, that was his motto. Allergic to physical affection. Said 'I love you' to my face exactly two times. And now it's the exact same with Superman, a man who would never even think of – do you think he *can* feel love like –"

Clark appears at her elbow, almost out of thin air.

"Woah," Lois gasps, jerking back in surprise. She must be drunker than she thought.

"One more sip, then water," Clark says, his blue eyes steady behind his outrageous glasses.

"I'm not a child," Lois says before taking the largest swallow of her martini that she can gulp down. "You don't have to baby me."

"Agree to disagree," Clark says with a small smile as he swaps her glass for his. "You're not a child, of course. But you could use a little babying, I think. Especially after the long week you've had."

"Mm hm," Lois hums as she tips back the water. "Got that right, Smallville." She raises her eyes to meet his as he settles down on the couch next to where she's sprawled over three-quarters of it, legs akimbo, one arm draped over the back, the other propping her head up on the armrest. "How about you? Do you have any daddy issues worth sharing?"

Clark twitches.

“C’mon,” Lois sits up a little, smirking. “It’s sharing hour.”

“Most people would call this the sleeping hour, since it is *two o'clock in the morning*.”

Lois waves him off and makes a *pfft* sound in the back of her throat. “Like I could get you to cop to any of this in the harsh light of day.” She squints and the fuzzy edges around Clark settle into something more definite, and definitely shifty. “You *do!”* she crows. Her instincts are never wrong. And Clark might be a tough nut to crack, but she’s the best for a reason, and it’s not because of her killer legs or shiny hair – it’s her investigative nose.

Clark sighs. “I’m adopted, Lois. I think daddy issues are part of the deal.” He picks up his half-empty beer bottle and slowly rotates it in his hands. “My parents are wonderful, the best, honestly. But my birth father… there’s a lot of questions there.”

Lois blinks. “You’re adopted?”

Clark lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug.

“Since *when?”* she demands. How did she not know this?

“Since as long as you’ve known me,” Clark says wryly.

“You never told me!”

Clark pats her shin, her closest body part. “You never asked.”

Lois tosses back her glass, nose wrinkling as the ice-cold water hits her tongue. No gin. “Regardless,” she says in a sad attempt to regain her composure, “you should’ve said. These are the types of things best friends know about each other.”

Clark’s eyebrows fly up, higher than the rims of his glasses. “I’m your best friend?”

“Well it’s certainly not Steve Lombard,” Lois says flatly, fighting desperately not to let her panic show on her face.

Clark stares owlishly at her. “I just thought…” he drifts off.

Lois bristles. “Look,” she says, and, god, it’s so much easier to lean into her anger than embarrassment, “I know I’m not yours, and I don’t play well with other kids on the playground, so forget I said –”

Clark squeezes her ankle, and Lois shuts up at the look on his face. "For someone so confident, you have the weirdest insecurities."

"If this is supposed to make me feel *better* – " Lois starts hotly.

"Of course you're my best friend," Clark says, his voice almost unbearably sincere.

"Oh."

Clark sits back, a small smile playing on his lips. "What makes you think you weren't?"

Lois throws up her hands, slopping half her water over the floor. She rolls her eyes as Clark immediately grabs a few of their abandoned take-out napkins to mop it up. "It's just… you're so *nice."*

"What does that have to do with anything?" Clark asks as he gets down on all fours before she can lift a finger, practically proving her point for her.

"People *like* you."

"People like you too," Clark points out.

"People admire me," Lois says, her mouth twisting unhappily. "People want to sleep with me. People are intimidated by me. Very few people actually *like* me."

After a beat, Clark protests, "I like you."

"Pretty sure you've taken one too many hay bales to the head, but I'll take it," Lois murmurs as she flops back on her couch.

"You've never been a maudlin drunk before," Clark says as he straightens, slips in a leftover bit of water, and just catches himself on the armrest of her couch before he can crash back to the floor. "What brought this on?"

Lois shrugs. "Maybe all the near-death experiences are finally catching up with me. Making me re-evaluate what I really want in life."

"To be liked?" Clark asks skeptically.

Lois screws up her face. "Maybe? I don't know," she sighs. "Doesn't everyone want to be liked? Wanted?" She bites her lip.

Moving more carefully this time, Clark gets to his feet. “I think it depends,” he says, avoiding her gaze. “I think people want to be liked – to be wanted – for who they actually are, and not for the face they present to the world.”

Lois frowns. “But can you actually *know* someone on that level?”

“I’d like to think so,” Clark says, the faintest note of wistfulness in his voice.

“Does anyone know you like that?” Lois scrunches her nose as she burrows further into her couch. God, she’s tired. “I don’t think I do.” Admitting it hurts more than she expected it to. Before, she thought she had a pretty good grasp on Clark Kent, investigative reporter and her favorite second banana.

“My parents,” Clark says at once. He pauses. “And I think you and I could get there. Someday.” He clears his throat. “If you, um, wanted that.”

Lois throws back the rest of her water. “Yeah, sure, why not,” she says, eyes closed as she swallows. When she opens them, she can see clear as day that her blase attitude hasn’t fooled him in the slightest. He’s such a sap. “Hey, if you’re adopted – are you even *from Kansas?”* She lets out a theatrical gasp. “Will I have to give up all the hicksville jokes?”

“I’m pretty sure you’d still call me a hayseed if I was actually born in Gotham,” Clark says with a smile as he tugs her to her feet. “C’mon, I can see you falling asleep.”

Lois lets him. “Please tell me you’re not from Gotham. I wouldn’t be able to take it .”

“Lois,” Clark says, the tsk heavy in his voice. “My other best friend is from Gotham! It’s really not that bad.”

Lois swats his shoulder. “I knew I wasn’t your real best friend! Who is it? I didn’t know you associated with anyone from that ugly trash pile of a city.”

Clark laughs. “His name is Bruce.”

Lois totters down the hallway to her bedroom with Clark trailing after her, one arm out to catch her if she stumbled, the other holding her empty glass of water. “That’s a stupid name. What’s his full name?”

“So you can stalk him?” Clark lets her flop onto her bed as he heads to her en suite bathroom.

“Maybe,” Lois grumbles into her pillow. Everything has taken on a lovely fuzzy quality, but maybe that’s her duvet taking up half her field of vision.

Clark’s head pops out from behind the door frame. “His name is Bruce Wayne.”

“Clark Kent, you *liar.”* She points a wobbly finger in his direction. “You do not know Bruce *Wayne.”*

Clark shrugs. “I’m just full of surprises tonight, apparently.”

“Wait – you’re serious?” Lois pushes herself up into a sitting position. If Clark – her *partner* of half a decade – has been sitting on the fact that he is on first name terms with the richest man on the East Coast, Lois is going to strangle him once she finds heels tall enough.

“If you ask him, we are, at most, distant acquaintances,” Clark says with a smile as he gently pushes her back down in bed and sets the now-full water glass on her nightstand. “So don’t worry – nobody is going to challenge you for the official position of my best friend, except maybe Jimmy.”

Lois yawns. “I could take on Jimmy. He’s got twiggy arms.”

Clark snorts. “Do not fight Jimmy.”

She closes her eyes, muttering, “I’m a great fighter.”

“I'm pretty sure the entire bullpen knows that.” Clark chuckles, his footsteps retreating to the door. “I’ll be in the living room if you need me.”

Lois inhales a loud breath. “Clark?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks,” she blearily opens her eyes, “for… everything. You know you’re my best friend, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” Clark says. “Get some sleep. Sober up. I’m sure you’ll be horrifically ashamed of all of this oversharing tomorrow.”

“Probably,” she agrees as she snuggles deeper into her pillow.

"'Night."

"Good night, Lois."

* * *

"I can't *believe you,"* Lois seethes as she slams the door behind her, her chandelier earrings quivering.

Clark sighs. "It's really not that big of a deal."

Lois whirls around. "It is!" she pokes him, hard, in the chest, right below his lopsided, droopy bow tie. "You are a *damn* good reporter, and I will punch anyone who says otherwise right in the face."

Clark's shoulders slump even further, which Lois didn't know was even possible. "I know. You nearly did."

"You shouldn't have held me back!"

"Lois," Clark says patiently, "it was a fundraiser for Metropolis' group homes. I couldn't let you start a fight in front of *literal children."*

"Oh, gimme a break. They're orphans. They've definitely seen worse."

Clark exhales a deep breath. "And why would I possibly let you add to their trauma?"

"To defend yourself! To defend your reputation!" Lois fumes as she stalks past him to yank open his refrigerator door. The chilled air wafts over her, but it does nothing to cool her burning rage. She skips the vegetables, jars of condiments, her favorite white wine Clark buys when she stays over.

Her stomach growls. The fundraiser, full of glitz and glamor, was full of on-trend bite-sized canapes and entrees that consisted of three slices of perfectly seasoned beef, artfully shredded greens, and two orange wedges. Oh, she would *kill* for hamburger right now, assuming Clark was out of the picture since he'd probably stop her from doing that too.

She tosses a half-empty pizza box in the general direction of the counter. It lands with a thud.

"My reputation is just fine, thanks," Clark says evenly. "Yours, on the other hand…"

“Is also fine,” Lois says scathingly, “because *you didn’t let me beat the crap outta him.”*

Clark tugs his bow tie loose. “Have you ever heard the advice, ‘pick your battles wisely’?”

Jesus Christ, what the fuck is he doing, parroting fortune cookies at her? She viciously throws open the lid of the pizza box, snarling, “Everyone knows the correct answer is always, D) all of the above,” and grabs the largest slice left.

Half the cold cheese stays stubbornly behind, attached to the rest of the pie. Fucking laws of inertia.

Lips pressed tightly together like he’s trying not to burst out laughing, Clark leans over and gently eases a new slice free. The cold, congealed cheese stays in its perfect, pre-cut triangle shape. “This might be a metaphor,” he says as he swaps slices with her.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Lois huffs before she stuffs her mouth with pizza.

Clark sighs as he reaches over to surgically separate the extra cheese from the pie and reattach it to Lois’s first attempt. “I feel like you’ve also never heard the saying, ‘you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar’.”

Again with the fortune cookie wisdom. She rolls her eyes. “Heard it. Didn’t care for it.”

Clark chuckles. “I’m not surprised.” He takes a bite of pizza, chewing thoughtfully. “While I… appreciate the support, you don’t need to fight my battles for me.”

“Well, someone clearly does, if you’re not going to step up,” Lois retorts, elbows braced on the table. She stares him down.

“I’m choosing not to engage,” Clark points out, his gaze unwavering, as Lois grimaces. “That’s still a strategic decision, and I need you to recognize that.”

“Yeah, sure,” she grumbles. “But,” she hesitates, searching for the right words. “Why? The things he was saying about you… if he insinuated those things about *my* work, *my* ethics, I would’ve put him in the hospital. Fundraiser and traumatized orphans be damned.”

Clark sighs. “I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can,” Lois says. “I’ve seen those arms you hide under a billion layers, farm boy.”

Clark’s eyes narrow. “That’s *exactly* why, Lois.”

Lois purses her lips, and she won’t give Clark the satisfaction of saying she really has no fucking idea what he’s talking about. Still, something in her expression must give the game away.

Hesitantly, Clark starts, “I might not look it all the time, but I’m a pretty big guy.”

Lois smirks. “You get stuck in the revolving door every morning like clockwork, buddy. Believe me, I know.”

“So,” Clark plows on, ignoring her entirely truthful if not-very-nice aside, “if word spreads that I can and will throw my weight around when provoked, my sources will dry up faster than a full crop during a heatwave.”

“No, they won’t. Your sources *know you,”* Lois argues. “They know you’re a good guy. That you wouldn’t fly off the handle without a good reason,” she rolls her eyes, “unlike certain people in this apartment who *will* go unnamed.”

Lois almost never pokes fun at herself because it gives others license to do the same. When Clark tries, she gives twice as good as she gets. He has never let that stop him, though. Honestly, if he ever gives up ribbing her for good, she will assume he’d been replaced by an alien and will investigate accordingly.

Clark smiles wryly. “And how many ‘nice guys’ have you really known that turn out to be bad guys behind closed doors or when things get a little tough?”

Lois opens her mouth because that argument is a moot point; Clark is practically the *paragon* of an old fashioned gentleman, minus the sexism and casual microaggressions. But she shuts her jaw with a snap. Silently, she answers the actual question he asked*: all of them.* Every so-called “nice guy” she’s met has always turned out to have a hidden mean streak. Sometimes it came out with waiters on the third date. Other times it came out after she published a not-so-flattering but entirely factual quote that he *said to her face.*

Except Clark.

For fuck's sake, two days ago, Clark apologized to *her* for the time she cried all over his favorite Smallville High sweatshirt after she bruised her toe kicking *his* wall. It'd just been one of those days – Superman nearly died saving them all in the morning from Metallo, Perry shot down all her best pitches for her next investigative piece, her AC broke at the hottest point in the day in the hottest week of the year, so she had to migrate to Clark's place, but he was out running errands, so she waited in his dingy (non-air conditioned) lobby for 20 minutes, and then… she bruised her toe.

"Okay, fine, but you're not like that," Lois counters, tilting her head pointedly at the foot-high dent in the plaster behind her.

"Come on." Clark jabs his pizza crust accusingly at her. "You have to know how weak that argument is."

Lois chews mulishly at him. Fuck Clark for being right.

"Look," he polishes off the rest of his crust, swallows, and says, "I'm not saying I'll roll over for *every* Tom, Dick, or Harry –"

"You sure about that?"

Clark glares. "I am not a doormat, Lois."

Lois's head jerks up at the tone of his voice. "I'm not saying –"

"I think you are," Clark interrupts. He exhales a short, explosive breath, and for a flash, Lois sees that steel-like backbone she's only read before in his articles. "Just because I'm not as showy with retaliation does *not* mean I am incapable of it."

"Really," she says dubiously because if there's anything Lois Lane is good at, it's needling one Clark Kent.

He throws her a look like he knows she's goading him, and he is not falling for it; he is *going along* with it. "Remember Jay Harrison?"

Lois's eyebrows rise. She hasn't heard that name in two years, not after he sued The Planet for libel. Their investigative team, led by Clark, had published an expose on the fraud in his healthcare insurance company. The Planet won (barely), but they all h to tighten their belts for the rest of the year and cut their summer internship program to pay all the legal fees.

“After – well after everything,” Clark starts awkwardly, “all he had left was the Liberty Building. And everyone knew it was practically crumbling in on himself, but he paid off all the building inspectors, so he got to keep it as collateral for all those loans.”

“Mm hm,” Lois nods along. So far, so boring. But Clark wouldn't be telling the story if it stayed that way.

Clark taps his chin, brow furrowing. “I think you were covering the Vincents’ murder-suicide at the time, but it was a quiet week in terms of giant robots and alien invasions, so I flagged down Superman -"

Lois’s eyes nearly bug out of her head.

" - and asked him nicely to mention the Liberty Building in his upcoming speech about Metropolis’s Lead Removal and Compensation Commission. It was filled with the stuff, you know.”

Lois says, genuinely surprised, “You got *Superman* to help? I – I didn’t think you were that close to him.”

Clark shrugs. “I’ve written about him a fair bit.”

“Unwillingly,” she points out. Clark always complained the loudest when he got assigned Superman stories, in sharp contrast to Cat, who squealed at a pitch wholly unbefitting a woman her age with that much cleavage spilling out of her shirt. As if Superman could be swayed by a push up bra and strategically placed bronzer.

(Lois tried that her second week with zero results)

Clark rolls his eyes and folds his slice of pizza in half for easier eating. “He can be useful. At times.”

Lois yanks the slice right out of his hands and stuffs as much of it in her mouth as she can. “No pitha for Ooperman hatahs.”

“I *just* said he was useful!” Clark protests with a small smile as he steals the rest back.

Lois, preoccupied with not spraying the counter with masticated dough and sauce, lets it go with a glare.

Clark takes a large bite and swallows. “Anyway, the Commissioner of the Department of Buildings turned out to be a massive Superman fan. He could probably give you a run for your money, actually –”

“Doubtful.”

“ – so he was more than happy to take Harrison’s money *and* condemn his building. What was Harrison going to do, sue him for breach of bribery?”

Lois whistles. “And that’s why we haven’t heard anything from Jay Harrison since.”

“He officially declared bankruptcy ten months ago,” Clark says matter-of-factly.

“Hang on, I think I *did* hear about that,” Lois says, the memory tugging at her. “He had to leave Metropolis, right?”

“Sold everything he owned,” Clark says with a satisfied nod. “And then I –” He coughs. “And, well, that was that.” He polishes off the rest of his pizza, a faint pink spreading across his cheeks.

Lois’s eyes narrow. “What were you going to say?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing my ass, Smallville. Spit it out.”

Clark sighs. He leans both elbows on her counter, back bowing. “I’m not proud of it.”

Lois leans in, a shark-like grin tugging at her mouth. “Well, now you *have* to tell me.”

“I might’ve… *stolenhisdog.”*

“You *what?”* Lois splutters, loud, surprised laughter spilling from her lips.

Clark hangs his head. “Harrison had no money, no property, was driven out of his city, but - but it was my *first* time directing the investigative team, and then he had to go and get us all tangled up in that awful court case when he *could have* ridden the bad press out. Instead, he dragged the entire Planet down with him.”

“So, you figured the only logical thing to do, when a man is down, is to steal his dog?” Lois asks, thoroughly amused.

Clark nods miserably. “She was one of those fancy hypoallergenic ones. And just before he was about to leave town, Ma mentioned that

the Cushings down the road were having a devil of a time finding a pet for Sophie, and, well…" He drifts off, clearly ashamed.

Lois leans back, surveying Clark in a whole new light. "You petty son of a bitch," she breathes.

"Lois," Clark pleads, now a deep shade of maroon.

"I don't think I've ever liked you more, Kent," she says smartly as she turns to open the refrigerator.

Clark scrubs his hand down his face. "I'm a terrible person."

She brandishes the wine aloft and kicks off her heels. "Okay," she says as she scurries around the counter to tug Clark off his seat. "You and me, we're gonna have an old-fashioned sleepover. I'm gonna count that dognapping story as your truth." She drags him in the direction of his bedroom, where she's currently sleeping since he insisted (as always) on taking the couch.

"Lois," he protests, even as his feet follow hers down the short hallway. "Aren't we a bit old for sleepovers?"

She glances over her shoulder, making her violet eyes nice and big. "But, Clark, I'm an army brat. I never got a real sleepover growing up."

He falters because he might *say* he's some big bad reporter, but she can always play him like a fiddle. "I… fine."

Lois punches him in the shoulder. "That's the spirit. Now, how about a dare?"

* * *

"What a load of bull," Lois hisses. She throws a balled-up napkin at her television and scowls as it leaves a barely-there smear of duck sauce behind.

Her doorbell rings. Swearing under her breath, she hauls herself to her feet, checks her hair, and tugs her sweater back into place. In the background, the news anchor drones on, *"Police have put out an official APB on Superman, who is wanted for questioning in connection to…"*

She peers through the peephole and swings the door open wide. "I thought you went home sick," she says as Clark steps inside.

Clark swallows as he meets her eyes. “I’m feeling better, thank you.”

“You don’t look better,” she says critically as she not-so-gently pushes (shoves) him towards her La-Z Boy.

“It’s been a long day,” he mutters.

Lois huffs as she bends over to crank it back into a semi-reclined position. For fuck’s sake, does she have to do everything around here? “Feet up,” she says curtly.

Clark obliges without a word, and Lois’s concern grows exponentially. He *never* lets her do anything for him; he jumps in front of her to catch every door; he always cleans up after they get takeout. Just last year, he ruined his only halfway decent suit fetching her a drink on their way into The Planet’s holiday party.

Her brows knit together with concern as she watches him sit in her recliner, still tense as a two by four. “What did you have, anyway?”

Clark shrugs. “A stomach bug. I don’t know. I’m fine now.”

Lois makes a face as she picks up her half-finished lo mein and the remote to turn the volume up. “You really don’t look fine.”

Clark says nothing, his expression darkening as the news report filters in between them: *“So far, 23 people have been confirmed dead in what the authorities are now calling a coordinated attack, with an unknown number of wounded –”*

Anger spiking again, Lois nearly throws the remote at the television, but she refrains because she bought $500 dollars worth of shoes last month, and she can’t afford to replace it *and* the toaster she broke fishing out her frozen waffles last week at four in the morning. “Can you believe this?” she demands instead.

Clark turns slowly to the screen, his expression haunted. “Yes,” he says shortly.

Lois makes an enraged noise in the back of her throat. Trust Clark not to back her up in her time of need. What a fucking partner she saddled herself with, the one reporter at The Planet who wasn’t an official member of the Superman Fan Club.

(Clark gave her an actual laminated card for her birthday.)

So she tells him, “Fuck you, Clark.”

But, instead of fighting back like he always does when she lashes out, Clark just hunches in further on himself. He stays silent, his eyes never leaving the newscast.

What the hell is going on? First, Clark is interested in a breaking Superman story, and now he’s not interested in holding up his side of their usual banter. “Okay,” she says, sitting up and scooching over closer to the side of her couch closer to the recliner. Superman can wait; he’s a demigod with a magical ice fortress and advanced alien technology. Her hayseed partner clearly needs her more. “What’s going on?”

Clark catches sight of her determined face and swallows. “I’m surprised you’re not in the bullpen writing the story up right now,” he says, clearly trying for levity and missing by a solid mile. This also doesn’t answer her question.

Lois rolls her eyes. “I phoned it in two hours ago.”

“Oh.”

She shoves the lo mein carton in his face. “Eat.”

“What?”

“You look like death warmed over. Eat.” As Clark throws her a funny look, she huffs, “It’s Granny Lane’s special recipe.”

Whenever she’s feeling down or PMSing, Clark has supernatural ability to show up at the right time with a homemade apple pie or donuts from the bakery down the block. Afterwards, she always feels better. But Lois has always been more prone to act in the moment than plan ahead of time, so she works with what she has. In this case, lo mein.

Clark takes it, saying quietly, “I’m pretty sure this comes from Chow House and that your paternal grandmother died before you were born.”

Lois holds back a growl of frustration. Can’t the man just accept the nice gesture?

Of course Clark knows about her grandmother. She must’ve mentioned her namesake once in the past five years, and Clark, with

his mind like a steel-trap, never fucking forgets anything. Lois has a great memory – notepads get lost; recorders run out of battery – but even she can admit Clark *just* about beats her in the recall department. It's one of his most thoughtful and infuriating qualities.

Lois shakes the carton in front of his face. "I will drop this on you. Don't test me." One chopstick helpfully wiggles loose and bounces off Clark's glasses, proving her point.

"I think your bedside manner needs work," Clark says as he picks up the chopstick from where it left a grease stain on his shirt and takes the lo mein from her.

The tension in her forehead eases just a smidge. If he's mocking her, he's already feeling better. She retorts, "Like you could do any better, Kansas."

Clark's eyebrows raise. "If you asked literally anyone who knows the both of us, they'd say I could do better." He peers down at the carton. "Did you eat all of the baby corn already?"

"What of it?" She will not apologize for eating the best parts first. Life is short. "Haven't you eaten enough corn for several lifetimes back in Smallville?"

Clark grimaces around a mouthful of noodles. "We don't grow the kind of corn you eat."

She is so going to regret this – "What other kind of corn is there?"

"All kinds," Clark says, and he must really be out of it because he doesn't seem to notice that Lois would normally *never* give him this kind of opening.

As he goes on (and on) about the state of midwestern agriculture, Lois polishes off the rest of her dumplings and grabs her emergency stash of chocolate fudge brownie ice cream from the freezer. Every once in a while, she mentally flags one of his facts and figures. While Metropolis doesn't really grow any of its food, it sure imports a lot from other places, and Lois has written up two or three outbreaks of listeria and salmonella before. It's conceivable *something* in Clark's blathering could be useful. Someday. If she gets really unlucky during a glacially slow news cycle.

"And now for the evening forecast –"

Clark breaks off, his head swivelling around to stare at the aggressively charming graphic proclaiming it will be 63 degrees and sunny tomorrow.

"'Bout time," Lois grumbles as she silently hands Clark the three-quarters empty carton of ice cream. His throat has got to be parched from going on and about Smallville's annual harvest festival. Apparently they had a Sugar Bowl stand that made *chocolate bacon* last year.

With attractions like that, it's a wonder Clark ever left for the big city.

"I…" Clark drifts off, looking entirely lost as he stares down at the melted ice cream.

"Ice cream makes everything better." She eyes him expectantly. "You want a shot to pour in there too?" she asks, entirely seriously.

Clark chokes around the spoon in his mouth.

"I'll take that as a no," Lois says slowly.

Clark clears his throat. "No, thank you."

She sighs as she reaches over to turn off the television. The abrupt silence grows and swells between them, like an almost palpable entity.

Clark blurts, not entirely out of nowhere, "Do you think Superman did it?"

"Absolutely not," she says with zero hesitation.

Clark straightens, his eyes going wide behind his thick glasses. "You don't?"

"No," she says, frowning at him. "Why?" her voice sharpens. "Do you?"

Clark looks away. "I… I'm not sure."

She slaps his upper arm with the back of her hand. "Come *on* , you're telling me you can't smell the setup a fucking mile away." At Clark's bemused expression, she huffs and steals her ice cream back. Superman-doubters don't deserve ice cream.

"I admire your faith," Clark says quietly, his expression inscrutable.

Lois sniffs. “Faith’s got nothing to do with it.” At his probing look, she lets out a gusty sigh. “I swear, people hear the word ‘Superman’ and all their capacities for logical thought go flying out the window –”

Clark coughs loudly, and it sounds suspiciously like, *“Look who’s talking.”*

Lois chooses not to snap at his bait because Clark has had a very hard day, and she is the best goddamn friend he has ever known. Instead, she continues, “But we in *investigative* journalism know how a good spin hides all the inconvenient details that would unravel the whole story.”

She ticks off on her fingers, “No credible witnesses at the first scene. Only circumstantial evidence at the second scene. And at the third, well,” she gestures at the television now playing an ad to visit Gotham, which *why* ; the Gotham tourism bureau might as well burn their money while they’re at it, “no witnesses *or* solid evidence. Whoever really did it must figure they’ve got it in the bag with all this enormous public outcry from the mayor, from social media, from dear old Aunt Sally who heard the *whole story* third-hand from her hairdresser, so they’ve gotten sloppy and complacent.”

“I didn’t think of all of that,” Clark admits.

Lois doesn’t even try to hold back her gloat. “That’s why I get the real bylines, and your name is below the fold.”

Clark snorts. “I suppose so.” He studies her. “And why aren’t you writing up this award-winning, hard-hitting, front page story right now?”

“I don’t have all the details yet,” Lois says, frustrated because she was at it for *hours* tracking down sources and evidence, and she only broke for dinner at 10:30 at night, “and it’s clearly a delicate situation. I need to get everything right to clear his name.”

Before some idiot intern could jot the top ten worst takes they’d seen on Twitter, she drafted and submitted a quick write up because she’d prefer real information in print instead of sensationalist drivel masquerading as fact. But she’s saving her big guns for the actual story – which isn’t the building collapses, but the smear campaign.

The corners of Clark’s mouth lift in the ghost of a smile. “And still you say it’s not faith?”

“No,” Lois says stubbornly. “You know as well as I do that most people can turn on a dime –”

“Not most.”

“Agree to disagree, you incurable optimist,” Lois says without missing a beat. “And Superman *could*, theoretically, but after all he’s done for us, I figure he’s earned the benefit of the doubt.” As Clark opens his mouth, she adds, “Which is *not* blind faith, by the way.”

Clark sits back, mulling over her words. “So this *isn’t* your… infatuation with Superman talking?”

How dare he. Lois says waspishly, “Excuse me, Mr. Harvest-Festival-is-the-Social-Event-of-the-Season –”

“Hey,” he says, smiling for the first time since he entered her apartment, “don’t bring the Harvest Fest into this –”

She shakes her finger in his face. “I am *not* a middle school girl with a stupid crush –”

“It’s not stupid! Many women, um, and some men too –”

Lois holds up a hand, and Clark goes quiet, his blue eyes dancing behind his glasses. Fuck him with the pointy end of a corn stalk. He is the *worst.*

“I *may* have gone overboard when he first got here,” she says delicately. “Sue me. I’d never seen an alien up close before –”

“Ah, it awoke the extraterrestrial scientist in you. Got it.”

“Shut up, Kent,” she says in one breath. “As I was *saying,* I may have overdid it, just a little, by a hair, really, but it’s hard to maintain that kind of… infatuation after seeing the guy hopped up on that weird kryptonite that made him all thirsty and sweaty and swear a lot. You know, that time he tried to drink Hob’s Bay dry.”

It also gave Superman what looked like a raging boner, but Lois figures Clark might actually combust if she said the word ‘boner’, out loud, in his presence.

Clark flushes. “I suppose not.” He heaves a weighty sigh. “At least the city got some good photos for their annual charity calendar.”

“Mm hm.”

“You bought it, didn’t you?”

Of course she did.

“It was for charity,” she says primly. “How could I resist helping those poor, homeless, children?”

“The money went to the city’s animal shelters,” Clark says, his voice as flat as his home state.

She waves off his semantics. “Yeah, the poor, homeless puppies. That’s what I said.”

Chuckling, Clark puts the empty lo mein carton inside the ice cream container and gets up to clear the rest of (primarily her) Chinese takeout from the living room.

“You’re staying over, right?” she calls as he heads into her kitchen.

“I couldn’t impose…” he starts as he reenters her living room, a fresh dripping of ice cream coursing down his shirt. Typical.

“It wouldn’t be imposing if you helped with the story,” Lois says.

“Shared byline?” he tries because he *is* an incurable optimist.

“Research credit,” she counters.

Smiling ruefully, he shakes his head as he sits back down. “Your name first.”

“It’d better be fucking first, and you’re getting donuts from that 24 hour diner on 5th in two hours when we need to refuel.”

Clark holds out his hand. “You drive a hard bargain, Lois.”

She takes it, her grip firm as ever, and looks him square in the eye. “And don’t you forget it.”

* * *

“Stop whatever you’re doing,” Lois announces as soon as Clark opens the door to let her in. “This is more important, and I need all hands on deck.”

“Surely the deck can wait until –” Clark startles as he looks at his watch. “Gosh, Lois, it’s *three* in the morning!”

“Good reporters never sleep,” she crows as she makes a beeline for the coffee maker in the kitchen. She spins on her heel to face him, hands on her hips. “I’ve got the story of the century for you.”

“You are unbelievable.”

Lois beams. “Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.” He sighs. “I thought, after everything that happened last Tuesday –”

“ *Story - of - the - century* ,” Lois interrupts, punctuating each word with a little clap to get it through his thick, thick skull.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve heard you say that at least five times before,” he says wearily. He rattles off, “Luthor’s election campaign scandal. Intergang’s money laundering racket. The governor’s fraud and abuse within the City Housing Authority. Luthor’s *second* election campaign scandal.”

Lois scowls as she grabs the bag of grounds from his cabinet and puts in a new filter. “That’s only four.”

Clark drums his fingers against the counter. “When Bernini’s closed, and you said your reporting would shake the very foundations of Metropolis.”

“Hey,” Lois protests, “You loved their chicken parm as much as I did!”

“Sure I did,” Clarks says, his voice horribly reasonable-sounding, “but I didn’t put in print that their landlord was ‘a penny-pinching, corner-cutting bourgeois parasite and a prime example of why we should start using the guillotine’.” He pauses. “Not that you could spell guillotine if your life depended on it. ”

Lois grunts over the gurgling coffee. “I stand by that op-ed. I still dream about that chicken, I’ll have you know.”

“And,” Clark adds darkly, “who can forget ‘I Spent the Night with Superman’?”

Lois's lips purse. “That nearly won me the Pulitzer! It brought in 20,000 new subscriptions to The Planet in 24 hours. And you know Perry changed the headline on me *fifteen minutes* before he put the paper to bed.”

Clark frowns. “So you had fifteen minutes to change it back.”

Lois points a finger squarely at his face. “You’re just sore I got the interview first.”

Clark gapes at her. “You dangled yourself off Schuster Bridge!”

“And you didn’t, so that’s why I’m the better journalist, and you got scooped,” Lois says smartly.

Clark rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “Lord have mercy.”

“He’s got nothing to do with it.”

Clark watches her beadily as she pours a cup of coffee, adds milk and twice the amount of sugar she usually. His bright blue eyes catalog her every move. “Is everything okay?” he asks, his voice that kind of gentle-soft that makes her skin crawl. She has never needed to be treated with kid gloves in her life; she’s made of sterner stuff than that. And obviously she’s fucking *fine.* She found a lead that every reporter in a 50 mile radius missed – Clark very much included.

Lois unlocks her phone and shoves it in his face.

He winces as the almost offensively bright glare hits his glasses. “The Star?” he asks once he can actually read it, those two words dripping with skepticism. “You hate The Star.”

“Know thine enemy,” Lois says, grimacing as she watches Clark scroll.

Clark exhales a slow breath through his nose as he scans the cover story. “Seriously?” he asks, exasperated. “‘50 Questions with Superman’? Lois this was from *two months* ago ”

“Go to question 38,” she says as she pours him a mug too because she is a Good Friend.

“‘What is Superman's favorite food?’” Clark reads dispassionately. He meets her eyes. “Are you drunk?”

“What? No!”

“High?”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“Brainwashed?”

“Oh my *god* .”

Clark adopts a supremely constipated look. “Normally, I wouldn’t ask a woman this, but you’re acting so strangely.” He inhales a sharp breath. “Is it your time of –”

“You finish that sentence, and you’re a dead man, Kent,” Lois growls.

“But –”

She flaps her free hand in his direction as she sips at her coffee. “Keep reading.”

He taps her phone awake. “‘Superman: While I’ve eaten food from all over the world,’” he narrates, “my favorite has to be apple pie.’” Rolling his eyes, Clark says, “So Superman likes apple pie. What are we going to learn next, that his favorite sport is baseball, America’s pastime, and his favorite game show is Wheel of Fortune, America’s game? The guy has a very well-established theme.”

“Jesus Christ, and people think *I’m* the impatient one,” Lois says as she drains her coffee and reaches for Clark’s untouched mug. “Keep going.”

“Hey!” Clark grabs his coffee. “You have your own!”

Lois holds up both hands in a gesture of no harm. “Fine, fine, just keep reading.”

“‘There’s this bakery, Annette’s, in Dodge City, that makes the best pie I’ve ever eaten.’” Clark swallows. He sets down Lois’s phone on the counter. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“Superman has never officially been seen *near* Dodge City,” Lois says triumphantly. “The closest he has ever been recorded was Enid, Oklahoma, for tornado relief eighteen months ago.”

Clark blinks. “So?”

“It’s like you’re being deliberately obtuse,” Lois scolds as she helps herself to a refill of coffee. *“So,* I called Annette’s.”

Clark’s eyes go almost comically wide behind his glasses. “You did what? Why?”

“I called them,” Lois repeats, “to ask if Superman has ever stopped by for pie.”

Clark drags a hand down his face. “Of course you did,” he mutters. “And what did Annie tell you?”

Lois cocks her head, her mouth lifting into a too-wide smile. “So you know Annette’s too.” She taps her fingers eagerly against the edge of her mug. “I thought so. Dodge City is the closest ‘big city’ to Smallville, right?”

“Right,” Clark says, and by the despairing look on his face, he can already tell where this is going.

“Annette said she’s never seen Superman in her life.” Lois’s grin widens. “So Superman must have visited in *disguise.”*

Clark's face twitches. “Oh – oh no, *Lois* .”

“I’ve booked us two tickets on the next flight to Topeka.” She lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug, half-apology. “No direct flights to Dodge City from Metropolis.”

Alarmed, Clark starts, “Lois, I can’t just up and *leave* – ”

“Sure you can,” Lois interrupts. “Bring your laptop. You can write up your articles on the plane or in the rental. We’ll have plenty of downtime to work.”

“But Mrs. Kowalski –”

“We’ll be gone for 48 hours, tops,” Lois says as she grabs her phone. “I’m sure whatever your neighbor needs can wait.”

“Lois –”

“Pack light. I only budgeted carry-ons.”

“But –”

“Our flight is at 7:40, so I figure we should leave here at 5:30 just to be safe.”

“I –”

“Come on,” Lois says, her own impatience growing. “This could be *huge.* If Superman can successfully disguise himself, he might have used it in other places too! He might have a whole civilian identity – I *can’t* believe I’ve never even considered it before!”

Clark just stares at her.

“Well?” she demands. “What are you waiting for?”

“For you to come to your senses,” Clark says frankly. “This is crazy.”

“It’s a solid lead!”

Clark’s expression turns… pitying, and a stone drops into the pit of Lois’s stomach. He starts, “Are you sure you’re alright? After Tuesday, even *I* expected you to take a day or two to recover.”

“Recover? Recover from what?” Lois crosses her arms over her chest, her stare steely.

“Almost dying?” Clark says plainly.

Lois makes a derisive noise in the back of her throat. “As if that doesn’t happen every Tuesday.” She casts him an appraising look. “And I didn’t need Superman, anyway. I had my best guy, Clark, to save the day.”

But instead of looking reassured, Clark looks even more troubled.

“What,” Lois says flatly.

Clark shakes his head. “It’s nothing.”

“You’ve already called me crazy and implied I’m ejecting all my common sense along with the lining of my uterus,” Lois says dispassionately. “What’s one more offense?”

Clark’s shoulders slump, his spine bows, and he exhales an exhausted sigh. “You always do this.”

“Do *what* –”

“Run from strong emotions instead of confronting them.”

“Excuse me,” Lois interjects, her temper racing from 0 to 60 in a fraction of a second. “I have no fucking idea what gave you that bright idea –”

“Of course,” Clark cuts her off, eyes flashing behind his smudged lenses. “Who knows where I came up with that, when you’re so open and vulnerable at the best of times.”

Lois could slap him. So enraged she can barely get the words out, she starts, “I never thought you would ever -”

Clark reaches towards her, thinks better of it, and wraps his hand around his half empty mug instead. “Look, I’m not trying to make you mad –”

Lois retorts, “Great fucking job so far, really a stellar example of –”

“I’m just saying,” Clark says loudly, drowning her out, “you don’t have to be drunk or so sleep deprived you’re hallucinating to talk to me about what’s bothering you.”

“Nothing’s bothering me except you!” Lois snarls, her voice way too high, the words way too fast. “Jesus, Clark. Newsflash, I’ve had ten near-death experiences just this year, and it’s barely April! And I’m *fine.* Just because *you* usually freak out and run at the first sign things are going south doesn’t mean the rest of us can’t handle it.”

Clark nods once, his face shuttering.

The guilt hits her like a freight train. She – she didn’t mean *any* of that. It just came out, in the heat of the moment.

Clark has proven that he’s no coward many times over.

“I see,” Clark says, and the contrast between her sharp tone and his defeated words couldn’t be starker. “In that case, I’ll probably head back to bed. You’re welcome to stay over until your flight tomorrow.”

She forces out past the lump in her throat, “You’re leaving?”

Clark inhales a slow breath. “No, Lois. As far as I see it, *you’re* leaving, for Kansas, of all places,” he barks a short, humorless laugh. He meets her eyes. “But, let me remind you, you don’t have to. Nobody is forcing you to get on that plane.” He starts to get up.

“Clark, wait.”

Clark pauses, half sitting, half standing, hovering awkwardly over the bar stool.

Lois rakes a hand through her hair, frizzing at her temples and curling at the ends. “I – I came here because I couldn’t handle being alone. I thought I’d have an easier time convincing you to go Kansas than anywhere else. I haven’t slept in three days. I blew through all three of

my emergency smoke packs. I look like a trainwreck."

"Lois," Clark says as he slowly gets to his feet, "I mean this with all respect for you as a woman and a journalist, but I've definitely seen worse." He circles the counter, arms already outstretched.

"You're such an ass," Lois mumbles as he envelopes her in a firm hug.

"It's been said before," Clark rumbles in her ear. "Mostly by Ma when I eat the last slice of pie and don't tell her."

Lois chuckles a watery laugh. "Apple pie from Annette's?"

"Of course." He pulls back, smoothes down her hair and eyes her seriously. "You're welcome to stay here as long as you need. Or I can camp out at your place – you have a better view than I do."

"Mm hm," she hums as she wipes at her eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere," Clark promises as he wraps her in another hug.

"That's what I thought about *him,* " Lois says into his shirt.

Clark freezes.

"And I know it's irrational. I know it's crazy. I know it's probably my PMS talking. But he – he's never *not shown up.* I waited," she hiccups, "I waited for *an hour* after everything died down, and he never showed. He's always apologized before. He's always found the time. And I keep wondering – did I push him too far? Is he," her breath hitches, "is he finally tired of everything I put him through? It's been five years of this shit."

"No, no, never," Clark swears, hugging her tighter.

"I wouldn't blame him."

"I would," he says immediately.

Lois snorts. She draws back, horrified at the snot she sprayed all over Clark's shirt. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry."

"It's just a shirt," Clark says quickly. "Don't worry about it."

"But –"

He cuts her off with a swift kiss to her forehead. “It’s fine. I don’t care.”

She stares up at him, a strange, foreign heat curling deep in her belly the longer he stays there, not moving, leaving their mouths inches apart.

She surges up on her tiptoes and kisses him.

It takes her only a fraction of a second to realize he isn’t kissing her back. In fact, it’s quite like kissing a statue, which Lois once did on a dare on a 7th grade field trip to the Art Museum of Star City. He’s warm, unlike the marble, but that’s really her only saving grace.

God, her face feels like it’s on fire. She skitters back, looking anywhere but at Clark. “Right, um,” she says, and, Jesus Christ, what should she do with her hands? She plasters them to her thighs. No, that’s weird. She shoves them in her pockets instead. “Sorry, I don’t know what came over me,” she says, the words nearly tripping over themselves in her haste to get them out. “It’s late. I’m a mess. You’re… too nice.”

In her peripheral vision, Clark just blinks, slack-jawed, at her.

“I think I’ll actually head home. Might be better for – well, I’m sorry.”

Clark swallows. “You already said that.”

“Sorry,” Lois says automatically before she snaps her jaw shut with an audible click. “Great, now I’m sounding like you.” She backs out of the kitchen, awkwardly ambling blindly through the doorway with her hands still shoved in her pockets. “You apologize too much,” she brilliantly comes up with next, and, fuck, she could *hit* herself since Clark has not apologized once while she’s acting like a runner-up in the apology Olympics. She’s making no goddamn sense, and Clark is going to leave, and she’s going to lose the best friend she ever had, the one who has *always* been there for her when it counted, because she has such bad impulse control –

“I think you need to sleep,” Clark says gently. He pushes his glasses back into place; they got knocked askew when she jumped him.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” she agrees quickly. “Where’s my purse? I think I –”

“Stay,” Clark says as he nudges her in the direction of his bedroom. “It’s too late to head back to your place.”

“I don’t want to make you uncom –”

“I insist,” Clark says. “If you’re going to leave, you’re going to have to go through me first.”

She tries again, “But –”

“You’re exhausted,” Clark points out. “And short – even in heels. You’re not going to win this.”

Lois grimaces. “This is ridiculous.”

“Sure is,” Clark says amiably. “But then again, you wouldn’t be Lois Lane if you gave up at the first sign of resistance. That said, I’m afraid you’re going to lose this battle.”

“You're serious,” she says as she pulls her hands out of hear pockets to twist them anxiously together. “You really want me here? After… I… did that?” She swallows. “This isn't just your midwestern manners talking?”

“No,” Clark says simply.

She shakes her head. “You’re still an ass for calling me short. I’ll stay. But,” she points a finger in his face, “I’m finally taking the couch.”

“I can’t let you sleep on the *couch,”* Clark says, scandalized.

“Sure you can,” Lois says as she holds up her hand. “Rock paper scissors.”

“Lois, Just take the bed,” he sighs.

“Unless you’re going to bodily haul me over your shoulder like a caveman,” she announces, “I’m sleeping on the couch.”

They play rock paper scissors. Clark loses. As she makes up the couch with his help (she really couldn’t stop him there), he says without meeting her eyes, “I think you might be onto something with the secret identity thing.”

Lois’s fingers tighten around the cushion in her hands. “Seriously?”

Clark smiles, but there’s something off about it. He’s nervous, maybe scared? They’ve already turned off most of the lights, she’s practically seeing double with exhaustion, and he’s half-turned away from her.

She can't get a read on him at all.

"Give me a few days." He swallows. "I might take you up on that trip to Kansas after all."

* * *

"You've got to be joking," Lois says flatly as she takes in the lone bed in the middle of their cramped hotel room. The walls are covered with flowery wallpaper and bland oil landscapes, and yellowing, lacy white drapes are doing nothing to keep out the dimming Kansas sun in the west. The whole place smells slightly of old people.

Hopefully nobody died here in the past week.

Behind her, Clark lets out a bewildered, *"Gosh."* He straightens, bumps his head on the doorframe, and hunches back over as he closes the door behind them.

"Is this even a queen? It looks more like a double." She sits on the edge, nose wrinkling as she spreads both arms out to gauge the size. "And they'd better be out of rooms if they're cramming us in this shoebox. Although god knows why there's a rush on *Dodge City, Kansas* of all places."

"I'll take the floor," Clark says firmly.

"No way," Lois argues. "I'll step on you on the way to the bathroom and the other side is too small. We can share the bed."

"You *just* said it was too small."

Lois raises her eyebrows. "And are you planning on making off with my virtue, Kent?"

Clark goes bright red in a blink. "N-no! I would never – how could you even ask – of course not!"

Lois cracks up. "Jesus Christ, of course you would never. You're the exception that proves the rule."

Clark blinks at her, completely lost. "Thank you?"

Lois shrugs. "Fair warning, I kick in my sleep."

Clark lets out a surprised cough. "That – that won't be a problem."

“You say that until you wake up with black and blue shins,” Lois says darkly. “You want the first shower or should I?”

“Go ahead,” Clark demurs.

Lois beams as she flounces into the bathroom and shuts the door behind her. She stares at herself in the mirror, barely able to contain her whoop of joy. So far, all according to plan.

First up, her post-shower entrance. She turns on the water, yelping as the frigid cold spray hits her chest. Instead of leaving the shower and admitting defeat, she grits her teeth and bares it. This will only make her stronger. Probably.

After cleaning the post-travel grime off her, she spends entirely too long putting on makeup . Not a full face, but just enough to mask their eight hours of plane and rental car. Hopefully, if things go to plan, she won’t actually be sleeping for an hour or so yet.

She gives herself one last sweep with a critical eye, mentally reminds herself *It’s just Clark* , and turns to face the door. With a towel firmly wrapped around her chest that shows a tasteful amount of cleavage (or a scandalous amount if you asked Clark), she steps back out into the room.

As her lips curl up in a coy smile, she calls, “Sorry, I forgot my paja–” She breaks off at the sight of an empty hotel room. “Clark?” she says blankly.

But no, he’s definitely not in the room. For one, he couldn’t fit under the bed or inside the pudgy little armoire, and for another, there’s no way Clark wouldn’t jump and knock into something at the sight of a naked lady in a towel.

Damn. She’s been looking forward to the humor in addition to the (badly repressed) lust.

She ducks back into the bathroom, puzzled and a little embarrassed. He could have left to ask the front desk something or find a snack. Their airport dinner was a few hours ago now. A trip to the vending machine would take, what, five minutes max?

Okay, so a slight delay to her plans. Not a big deal. It’s not like anyone is going to die if she can’t seduce Clark Kent in the next five minutes.

She gets bored after ten.

By fifteen, she's changed into her silk pajamas and sat down cross legged on the bed.

After an hour, she's resentfully wiped off her makeup, pulled out her laptop, switched on the evening news, and started writing up her article notes.

As the television report flashes between drone shots of Superman rescuing flooding victims in Kentucky and updates from the field reporters, Lois gathers her data and compiles her quotes. So far, starting from the basics, she's got that Superman lives in Metropolis, watches every Meteor game, and reads The Daily Planet. It's not much to go on, which is why their visit to Annette's bakery tomorrow will hopefully point her in the right direction.

After two hours, her irritated concern has calcified into a hard stone of dread in the pit of her stomach. She changes back into regular clothes and heads out the door.

"Hi," she says, pasting on a smile as she approaches the front desk. "I was wondering if you'd seen my partner. Six feet or so, big guy, with glasses?"

The lady behind the front desk frowns, and Lois's smile vanishes. "I'm sorry," she apologizes, "I don't think anyone matching that description has been by. But my shift just started, and I can ring Martin to see if he saw your companion?"

She puts in her call, and Lois tries not to let her temper get the best of her as Martin answers in the negative. Fuming, she stomps back up to the room. She slams the door shut behind her, and nearly has a heart attack at the muffled, *"Oof!"* She yanks the door back open to reveal a stunned and rumpled Clark Kent.

"Where the fuck have you been?" she demands.

Clark exhales a slow breath. "I can explain," he says as he edges around her into the room.

"And why are you *wet?"* Lois says as the ceiling light catches on the droplets in his dark hair. The cuffs of his jacket are wet too, and the collar of shirt has a ring of moisture around the edge.

"I –"

"You've been gone *hours,"* Lois hisses. "I get out of the shower, and

you've just 'poof'! Vanished! What the hell was so important that you couldn't tell me that you were leaving at all?"

Clark shuffles in place. "I was –"

"We're in fucking *Kansas,"* she snaps, *"* so I know you didn't leave the oven on, need to feed Mrs. Kowalski's fish, have a doctor's appointment –"

"There –"

"So please tell me," she keeps steamrolling over him, "what the hell were you doing for," she glances at the bottom right hand corner of the newscast, where they always broadcast the time, "more than two hours?"

Clark's expression darkens. "If you'd just let me –"

"Jesus Christ, I thought you'd gotten into a car accident or, I don't know, were dead in a ditch somewhere! You couldn't call? You couldn't *text?"* she demands. "I know I make fun of Kansas for being hicksville central, but I *know* there's cell service here."

"Lois!" Clark snaps, "I get that you're angry. I get that you're frustrated."

"Do you?" she says, her voice raising as she jabs him hard in the chest. "Because if you did, I can't fathom why you would go radio silent *while I was in the shower.* Would it have been so hard to interrupt for five seconds? I know you're comically prudish at the best of times, but…" She drifts off, letting her hands fall limply to her sides. "This is something else," she finishes after a long beat. "I was worried."

Clark's shoulders slump and his spine bows as the fight seeps out of him. "I know. I'm sorry."

Lois shakes her head. "Just, where were you?"

Clark straightens. "I –" His eyes narrow behind his glasses as he turns to stare, hard, at the closed door behind them.

"Clark?" she prompts as he says nothing.

"I have to go," he says.

"Clark Joseph Kent," she starts, her voice dangerously low. "If you don't explain yourself *right fucking now* – "

“I can’t,” he says, sounding genuinely pained, which just makes her madder. “I’ll tell you everything when I get back.” And before she can grab his sleeve to physically keep him from leaving, he slips right back out the door.

“Fuck!” She kicks the mattress with her foot. She swears a blue streak up and down the length of her (admittedly small) hotel room, only pausing at the words *“robot invasion”* from the television. She freezes in place, staring at the screen, now showing a special breaking news report.

Robots are invading Metropolis.

And Lois Lane is stuck in Dodge *fucking* City.

It takes her five full minutes to pick her jaw off the floor and wake up her laptop. First, she calls Perry, who predictably doesn’t answer. Next, she calls Jimmy, who doesn’t pick up either. Desperate, she dials Cat, who is apparently safe and sound and watching the whole thing from Bruce Wayne’s annual fundraiser for Gotham’s orphan pets or whatever – Lois tunes her out as Superman, on the tiny hotel television screen, yanks off a robot’s laser gun and hurls it into space.

Then, Jimmy calls her back, and Lois finally gets real-time updates from a qualified source.

Superman finally shuts down the robot hivemind HQ around two in the morning.

Clark still has not returned. Her temper simmers just below the surface, a burning irritation that flares every time she thinks about it.

By three thirty, the 24-hour news cycle has moved on from the cleanup attempts. Lois shuts off the television, closes her laptop, and crawls under the covers, her mood pingponging from anxious to irate.

After what feels like minutes but what must be at least an hour later, judging by how she’s kicked off all the blankets, she wakes up in the darkness.

Movement, on the other side of the bed. Creaking, as the bedframe settles with the weight of an extra body.

“Clark?” she says muzzily.

“I’m back,” he says in a low voice.

She bolts upright and flips on the lamp on her side of the bed. “You’re back,” she repeats. She gives him a once over, as if could to deduce his whereabouts from his disheveled hair, crooked glasses, and generally weary demeanor.

Clark hunches in further on himself. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want apologies. You’ve already apologized plenty,” Lois hisses. “I want an explanation.”

Clark inhales a deep breath. “I know. And I’m going to tell you.”

Lois waits.

And waits some more.

Fed up, she erupts, “Just spit it out for god’s –”

“I’m Superman.”

Lois blinks. “Come again?”

Clark coughs. “I’m Superman,” he says, his voice thready and nervous, and he couldn’t sound *less* like Superman if he tried.

What the fuck is happening? *This* is what he’s going with? Did he hit his head on his mysterious four-hour errand? Eventually, she says, “You can’t be serious.”

But Clark just reaches up and removes his glasses.

Lois’s jaw drops as he starts on the buttons on his shirt next, revealing the familiar blue and S insignia.

“You wanted to know where I was?” Clark says quietly. “First, I was in Perry, Kentucky. It rained more than eight inches in two days. I put it off all day, but people were stranded and injured, and FEMA was going to get there too late.” He sets his glasses down on his nightstand and turns to face her fully.

Heat rushes to her cheeks. Possibly for the first time in her life, Lois Lane is stunned speechless.

“Then, I had to fly back to Metropolis,” he continues over her dumbfounded silence. “Toyman and Livewire teamed up to create an army of robots and hold the city hostage. It was the middle of the night, people were confused and terrified.” He sits up a little

straighter, far straighter than Clark Kent ever presented himself, and a shiver courses down Lois's spine, chilling her down to her very bones.

He keeps talking, describing the fight with details only Superman could possibly know, and his voice is steady, his posture is impeccable, and his eyes are so, so inhumanly blue without the glasses as a buffer.

She can't find a hint of Clark Kent anywhere in him. It's like her best friend never even really existed.

She's been such a *fool* .

He keeps talking. After Metropolis, he went to Vancouver to contain an out of control house fire and then Orlando to brace a collapsed high rise condominium. Lois checks her phone, and not even local news stations have picked these stories up yet; only a handful of local Twitter accounts mention Superman. But that's enough evidence for her.

"And that's where I've been," Superman finishes. "But I'm sure you have more questions. I promised to tell you everything, and I can do that now."

Lois *had* a billion questions for Clark Kent, her partner, her best friend, and recent star of her last sex dream. She has zero questions for Superman, except incoherent screaming.

He waits more or less patiently for Lois to say something.

Eventually, she forces out, "So you do have a secret identity."

Superman dips his head in a nod, and she could hear a phantom, *"of course I do,"* in Clark's voice that Superman is too magnanimous to say out loud.

She was right.

Of course she was right.

Superman has a disguise, a whole civilian identity he used to hide right under her nose. Was that why he befriended her in the first place? He reasoned she was the most likely in the media to discover his big Clark-Kent-shaped secret, so he positioned himself in such a way that she could never stomach splashing it across the front page. Because he was her *friend.*

The corners of her eyes prickle, but she valiantly swallows down the lump in her throat. Is that why he agreed to this stupid trip? Because she was getting too close, and he needed her out of the way where she couldn't make a scene when she found out the truth?

God, she's such an idiot.

Make that *a giant fucking idiot*, because his plan is working . She's going to scrap her article, delete all her notes, and text Perry to take her name off the agenda in the pitch meeting next week.

"Lois?" Superman asks, and, shit, he was definitely expecting more follow up questions.

In the increasingly tense silence between them, she glances down, anywhere but at *him.* And, fuck, she's still in her silk pajamas, the ones with the short shorts that reveal 98% of her legs and a sliver of skin above the waist band, below the lightly cropped top.

Modification floods her again, shriveling her stomach and making her fingers clench around nothing. God, she was going to seduce *Superman.* She couldn't think of a more useless, embarrassing endeavor, and she burns with shame the longer he just keeps looking at her.

She pushes herself off the bed.

"Lois?" Superman prompts, more confused this time.

Lois grabs the blankets from the floor and dumps them back on the bed. "It's late. I'm tired."

"Okay –"

"I'd like to be alone," she says curtly as she drags the covers up over her hips.

Superman opens his mouth, closes it, and opens it again only for him to falter as he meets her icy gaze. "Okay," he repeats, disappointed.

"I'm going to move up my flight tomorrow," she says as he gets to his feet, "since there's no need to visit Annette's Bakery now."

"There isn't?"

Lois throws him a scornful look. "I'm not going to write the article. Obviously."

He pinks. “Thank you,” he says sincerely. “I wasn’t – well, I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it.” She reaches over to turn off the lamp on the bedside table.

“Lois?” he tries in the darkness.

She says nothing, just clutches tighter at her pillow.

He sighs. “If you want to talk, just call for me. I promise I’ll hear you.”

Of course he’ll hear her. He hears everyone. He’s Superman.

She squeezes her eyes shut. “Get out.”

He does.

* * *

“What the hell?” Lois breathes at the ear splitting *crack* of stone breaking. She whips her head around to stare over the back of her couch, through the glass door to her balcony where a figure, a very familiar figure, in blue and red staggers to his feet. His face is white, and one hand is dripping crimson as he grips one of her planters to stay upright.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Lois swears as he hops to her feet and throws open the door. She raises her voice. “What are you doing here? Are you *bleeding?”*

He manages a bewildered, “Lois?” after far too long.

“Unbelievable,” she mutters as she starts to haul him inside. She can’t let one of her neighbors get the photo op of a lifetime on a goddamn *vape* break.

She dumps Superman unceremoniously on her couch and stands over him, hands on her hips. Panic crawls up her throat, but she violently shoves it back down. One problem at a time.

First, find the injury.

Stop the bleeding.

Make sure nothing else is wrong.

Last, kick his ass all the way to the moon.

She hurries to her bathroom and grabs her well-stocked first aid kit.

Back at his side, she turns him on his back. Just below his ribs, a nasty slash through his suit reveals the main problem. She pulls her phone out to get a good look, wincing involuntarily at all the free flowing blood reflecting the light back at her. “How did this happen?” she asks.

Superman doesn’t answer. His eyelids don’t even flutter.

Lois swears. She rifles around her first aid kit for something, anything, that might help a goddamn *alien*, and, god, that’s a scary amount of terror bubbling inside her, just under the surface. She’s just a journalist. She’s not a doctor. She’s not an xenobiologist. She’s not a –

“Kryptonite,” Superman slurs.

Okay. Lois nods. She can work with that.

He isn’t coughing, so he didn’t inhale it. He doesn’t have a radiation burn, so it didn’t touch him. He’s still bleeding, so it must be inside him. Lois snaps on a pair of gloves and grabs the tweezers, nearly spearing herself in her haste. “This is going to hurt,” she warns as she starts poking around.

Superman groans.

“This is so gross,” Lois tells him as she waves around her phone light again, squinting for a glimpse of lurid green. “You really got skewered here. Jesus Christ, you never do anything by halves,” she babbles because what if she doesn’t find it? What if he *dies* because she has no idea what she’s doing? What if –

Oh, there it is.

She sets her phone down. Gritting her teeth, she uses her free hand to keep the wound open wide enough for her to grab the kryptonite with the tweezers. At the first tug, he curls in on himself, making a choked-off sound of pain.

“Hold still,” she instructs as she wrestles back her own anxiety. “You big baby. You’re acting like a twelve-year-old on her first period.” She tries for the kryptonite again, yanking it halfway out this time.

“Lois,” Clark pants. “You have a *terrible* bedside manner.”

“Then you shouldn’t have come to St. Lois’s Walk In Clinic for Urgent Care and Stab Wounds,” she snaps. “But here we are.”

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, her face floods with shame. She’s acting too familiar with him. It’s just – impossibly – she forgot. For a half a second, she forgot that he’s a stranger to her and not her friend.

Biting her lip nearly to the point of bleeding herself, she squeezes the tweezers until her fingers are white and jerks her entire arm back. The kryptonite shard falls soundlessly to her plush carpet along with a glistening spray of blood. Jesus, that’s never going to come out. She’s going to have to replace the whole damn thing.

“What now?” Lois asks breathlessly as she bends down to pinch the shard between her trusty tweezers again.

“Put it in your hall closet,” Superman grunts, “since you never stripped the lead paint from the inside.”

“I told you –” Lois breaks off and nearly trips over the edge of the carpet as she spins on her heel to face him, her expression incredulous. “It’s really covered in lead paint?”

Superman nods.

With as much dignity as she can fake, Lois flees to the closet. She carefully sets the kryptonite in between her laundry detergent and handheld vacuum and tries to breathe.

That was the longest conversation she had with him since that disastrous night in Dodge City.

She lightly thunks her head against the wall and closes her eyes.

So much for all that “best friends” bullshit he fed her. And she lapped it up like an idiot.

She should have never taken a partner. But he wormed his way into her life, refused to be driven off. She had thought his determination was from the strength of his character, his ability to see how good they would be together. But no, he stuck around because he needed a journalist in his pocket. Lois Lane was the best in the city, the obvious choice. He must have been really patting himself on the back when he

realized she'd gone and fallen for him. There was no chance she'd leave after that.

She thought they were both safe. Good old dependable Clark, the rock that would always keep her steady. Unattainable, perfect Superman, the ideal up on that pedestal. And then she had to go and *fall* for Clark, after swooning after Superman for years, and she didn't even realize it until it was too late.

A year ago, if someone told her that Superman and Clark would abruptly leave and asked her at gunpoint who she would miss more, she would have said Superman in a heartbeat.

But over the past few weeks, she kept finding herself turning to Clark's desk, saving quips he'd find funny, and buying his favorite pastry at the bakery by her apartment before she remembered she hates sweet cheese danishes.

The only time she thought about Superman was as she lit up her emergency cigarette stash for the first time up on the roof, half expecting that rebuking, *"Miss Lane…"* to come down from the heavens.

The Planet may still be swarming with reporters, but Lois has never felt more alone.

She swallows and reaches up to wipe the angry, embarrassed tears gathering in the corners of her eyes, but she stops herself just in time from smearing his gross, alien blood all over her face.

Right, Superman is still in her living room. Bleeding. Possibly dying.

Her gut squirms with an unpleasant but all too familiar mix of anger, shame, and heartache. Her pulse is racing. But she opens the door anyway because she's *Lois fucking Lane*, and she has never run away from a fight in her life. Chin raised, guard up, Lois walks back into her living room.

It's empty.

Baffled, Lois scans her surroundings until – a flash of red on her balcony.

"That S on your chest must stand for *stupid,"* Lois thunders as she storms through the glass door to catch Superman before he can fall right off her 38th floor ledge. One knee buckles under his weight, but

she adjusts his arm over her shoulders until they're stable enough to make it back inside.

She drops him back on her couch and scowls down at him. "What the hell is your problem?" she demands. "You're clearly in no shape to fly."

Superman stares up at her, and, holy hell, she's never seen that expression on his face before. So vulnerable and… lost at the same time. God, he looks *so much* like Clark – minus the glasses – it makes her heart clench.

She shoves that thought away.

After far too long, Superman says through gritted teeth, "I didn't want to impose."

"Well, it's pretty fucking late for that," Lois snaps as she eyes the wound in his side. It's only sluggishly leaking blood now; it might even be scabbing over at the edges. She bends over her first aid kit and plucks out some gauze and antiseptic wipes. Can he even get a human infection? Better not risk it.

"I'm sorry," Superman says quietly as she crouches by the sofa, careful not to get any blood on her clothing.

Lois starts cleaning the wound, biting her tongue to keep all the bitter words inside. Fool her once, shame on her. He shouldn't have lied to her (and she was fucking furious about that), but *she* should have seen right through him. She was supposed to be the best journalist on the entire east coast. She's brought down billionaires, governors, and corruption at the highest levels of the Metropolis political arena.

But no, this time she let herself get fooled by a pair of glasses, a baggy suit, and a midwestern drawl. So much for her award-winning investigative nose.

She stays silent as she finishes sterilizing. She ignores every impulse to open her mouth, every smart line that would diffuse the tension, every acerbic retort that would make the situation worse. She presses a wad of gauze to the wound, now no longer bleeding, and tapes it over. "You'll live," she says brusquely as she moves to sit at the other end of the sofa.

"Thank you," Superman says as he starts to sit up.

“Stay down,” Lois says before he can make much progress. “Conserve your energy because I’m not gonna cart your ass –” she breaks off, closes her eyes, so she can’t see his face as her own flushes with humiliation. She forgot, again.

Superman.

He’s Superman – Not Clark.

Clark Kent doesn’t exist. Clark Kent is a mask. Clark Kent used her and dropped her when she got too close.

“Lois –”

She could flee to her bedroom like a coward. It’s not like he can outrun her in this state.

“Lois –”

She could turn on the television, drown him out.

“Lois, please –”

She rounds on him. “What?” she demands, fully aware she’s too loud, too emotional. “What the hell could you possibly want from me now?”

And Superman… recoils.

Lois blinks. That’s a new one. He never showed the slightest sign of hesitation when he was facing down Brainiac, Metallo, or even Zod. If she didn’t know better, she’d say he looked *scared.*

Scared of her?

He sighs. “I just wanted to let you know that I’ve interviewed for a job at the national desk.”

“What?”

He stares at her, his expression resolute. “I asked to start as soon as possible.”

“Oh.”

It’s not like she *liked* seeing him run out of the room when she entered the bullpen or duck out of every elevator she was just about to get in. But she was used to seeing him, and, no matter how angry or ashamed

she was, it brought her some degree of comfort.

Even though he clearly had other plans.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” she says as she reaches for the television remote. It’s something to do with her hands, and the noise might keep her from brooding too obviously.

Superman scans her face, searching, and she has no idea what he’s looking for, but he evidently doesn’t find it, judging from the downcast pinch to his mouth. “I’m sorry,” he says lamely.

“Don’t apologize. It’s a good career move,” Lois says without turning away from the screen. “If you care about that stuff,” she tacks on because who the fuck knows if Superman cares about something as minor as his *career*.

Never mind that Lois made her career her entire personality until she got saddled with the most aggravating partner in the world.

Superman turns to the television too, saying in an undertone, “I guess it is, but I always thought we’d be duking it out for Perry’s position once he retired. Not that he ever will, of course.”

“Perry’s going to die in that office.”

Superman turns to her. “Is that a threat or a prediction? No, don’t tell me – it’s a little bit of both.” He smiles.

“You don’t have to do this,” she says, her voice strained as her fingers clench around the television remote. What is he *doing* ? Why is acting like they’re friends, like nothing has changed? Why put the mask back on when she knows the truth?

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” she says automatically.

“Sor –” he breaks off under her withering glare. “It’s just – I *am* sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Lois stiffens. While it’s clearly true, everything in her rankles at any implication of weakness. “It’s fine.”

Superman sighs. “I suppose it’s a bit hypocritical to tell you not to lie to me.”

She lets out a derisive laugh. “You think?”

He shakes his head, his expression troubled. “I can’t even begin to think about how to make it up to you.”

Lois slowly turns to stare at him. “You’ve literally saved my life at least a hundred times,” she says woodenly. “What could you possibly have to make up for?”

“That’s the job,” Superman says dismissively. “That doesn’t count.”

And sure, Lois knew that she was just a job to him, an occasionally inconvenient convenience, but hearing it out loud hits at the sorest spot she has. She presses her lips together, and fleeing really looks like a good option right now, but she can’t give him another reason to think she’s even weaker than she is. So she stays.

“Ma said to just give you time,” he continues.

Hold on.

“But,” he adds, “she doesn’t know you like I do –”

Lois blurts, “She’s real?”

“What?”

Lois clears her throat. “Your mother?”

“My ma?” Superman’s brow furrows. “Of course she’s real. You’ve spoken to her and Pa on the phone.”

She frowns. “You said you were the last survivor of Krypton.”

Superman’s eyes narrow. “My birth parents died on Krypton,” he says slowly, “but my real parents live on a farm in Smallville. You’ve only brought it up *a million* times since I told you my second week at The Planet.” His expression turns incredulous. “Who did you *think* I was talking to every Sunday night?”

Lois throws up her hands. “I don’t know,” she says loudly, “actors?”

Superman barks a surprised laugh, and Lois *does not* cringe in response. He says, “That is insane. Why would I hire actors to play my parents?”

“You dress up in primary colors in the name of truth and justice,” Lois

snaps, “and you can bench press a goddamned mountain. What about any of this *isn’t* insane?”

Superman sighs. “I suppose that’s fair.”

“Of course it’s fucking fair,” Lois mutters, half to herself, as she turns to stare straight ahead at a commercial for a rheumatoid arthritis medication.

As the break moves on to an ad for a meal subscription service, Superman says quietly, “I was actually going to take you to meet them.”

Lois goes still.

“We were already in Kansas, and I was going to tell you about – well, you know,” he breaks off, an actual blush crawling up his cheeks, “so there was no reason not to go see them, unless you didn’t want to.”

Her mind churns like the rustiest of gears grinding together. Slowly, she asks, “You were going to take me to meet your parents?”

Superman looks away. “Only if you wanted to,” he repeats to the bloodstained carpet. “They’ve been dying to meet you for years.”

Lois swallows. That… doesn’t sound like the relationship she’d been piecing together in her head. You don’t take a patsy to meet your parents. Not unless they were actual psychopaths. But when she’d spoken to Martha and Jonathan Kent, they’d always seemed like perfectly normal parents. More normal than hers, for sure.

“Like a date?”

“What?” Superman yelps. “No!”

Lois can’t help her flinch. Right, of course. How ridiculous of her for even suggesting it.

“If we were going on a date,” he starts, his voice strangely intense, “I’d take you out somewhere nice in Metropolis. Waiters in suits, real flowers on the table, that sort of thing. Jeon Mi-do in Style had a few recommendations that were all out of my price budget, but I was working on it.” He shakes his head, smiling ruefully. “Gosh, a first date with you at my parents’ farm? Absolutely not.”

Lois has never, *ever* heard Superman say “*gosh*” before.

He says reverently, “I promised myself, if I was lucky enough to get a real date with you, I’d do it right.”

She stares at him, entirely bewildered. That definitely doesn’t sound like a relationship of convenience. That sounds like… he really, really likes her. But that makes no sense because –

“You didn’t kiss me back,” she says out loud.

Clark ducks his head. “I know you probably don’t believe me, but I didn’t enjoy lying to you. And it felt dishonest, um, *reciprocating* when you didn’t have the full story.”

“Jesus, you’re such a prude,” Lois says before she can stop herself. “It was just kissing.”

Clark goes as red as his cape as he mutters, “It wouldn’t have stayed that way for long if I – well, if I didn’t put a stop to it.”

Lois gapes at him. “Seriously?”

Clark huffs a self-deprecating laugh. “Lois, I’d been waiting for any sign from you for *years.* Not that I wasn’t happy being your friend!” he adds quickly. “Because of course I loved being your friend, and I’d never even dreamed that you’d ever call me your *best friend* in my first six months at The Planet –”

She gets to her feet, and he breaks off, his face full of apprehension. Silently, she turns off the television and kneels by his side of the couch.

Clark eyes her warily. “You’re going to ruin your pants.”

“Fuck my pants,” she says calmly. “More importantly, I have a question for you.”

“O-okay?” Clark stutters. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know.” At the look on her face, he quickly tacks on, “Except Batman’s identity.”

Lois valiantly tries not to get sidetracked.

“You know *Batman’s* secret identity?”

She fails.

Into the damning silence, she jokes, “What, are you part of some super secret superhero book club together?”

Clark purses his lips. Stiffly, he says, “We’re calling it *The Justice League* –”

Lois bursts out laughing. Holy shit, *this* is the story of the century. A band of superheroes from all over the country – the world? – coming together. How long have they been meeting? How long have they known each other? What are their plans?

“And if I tell you anything else,” Clark says in a rush, “Batman will string me up by my cape and unleash his very scary army of litigation lawyers for violating my NDA.”

Lois chokes. “He made you sign an NDA?”

“He’s a very strange man,” Clark says, his tone clearly conveying that, however strange she finds Batman, he is far stranger in real life. He shakes his head. “What were you going to ask me?”

Lois makes a face. “Well, now the mood’s ruined.”

Clark’s eyes widen. He swallows. “The mood?” he echoes dumbly.

Lois nods as she shuffles closer on her knees, close enough to trace that perfect curl hanging over his forehead and drag a fingertip along the light purple bags underneath his eyes.

Lois, herself, had cakes of makeup smeared over every pore of her face to hide her lack of sleep and mounting stress levels. From a distance, it looked like Clark brushed off their big blow up like it was nothing. But maybe Kryptonians show these sorts of things differently; something to ask him about later.

“Or maybe not?” she asks, pitching her voice low as she leans closer.

Clark gulps again, his adam’s apple bobbing. “No, I think it’s perfectly healthy.”

God, he’s such a dork. Put a hot, available lady in front of him, and all his brain cells go flying out the window. She smiles, and his eyes widen in alarm.

“Lois,” he starts, “I don’t want to get our signals crossed again.”

“I think the signals are pretty fucking clear from my end,” Lois says evenly.

“Golly,” he breathes, and –

Lois loses it. “Jesus,” she says between guffaws, “I cannot take you seriously at all. ‘Golly’? Really, Clark?”

Clark, blushing beet red, tries to sit up. “Look,” he says defensively, “If this is all one big joke to you, I really don’t appreciate it. I know I acted pretty terribly, but I never took you for –”

“No, no, it wasn’t a joke!” Lois says hurriedly as she places a hand squarely on the S to keep him in place. She stares at it because it’s a patently ridiculous thing to do: hold Superman back with just her hand. But he doesn’t budge an inch.

When she raises her gaze to meet his, she finds him eyeing her trepidatiously. She throws all pretenses out the window with a curt, “I like it.”

“You… like it,” Clark says, beyond dubious.

Lois makes a face. “You don’t have to rub it in.”

He shoots her a baffled look. “I’m not rubbing anything –”

“It’s just –” She swipes a hand through her hair, grimacing as flakes of dried blood fall on her face. She brushes them away impatiently. “I thought you made up everything about Clark Kent.”

“I *am* Clark Kent,” he protests, clearly offended.

“I know that now,” Lois says, rolling her eyes, “but for the past few weeks, I thought he was a part you were playing to, I don’t know, blend in, observe us –”

“I think you’re getting me confused with a pod person,” Clark says coldly.

Lois glares. “How was I to know that?” She gestures up and down the suit. “You act so differently. How was I to know who was the real you?”

Clark frowns, but he doesn’t offer an immediate counterargument.

“Anyway,” Lois says, business-like, now that the mood is now buried six feet under, “I have my answer if you let slip ‘golly’ when half your blood is on my floor and the other half is – well, you know.”

“Lois,” Clark mutters, mortified.

She giggles. “You make it too easy, Smallville.”

And Clark…melts at the nickname. There’s no other word for it, even in Lois’s enormous, if often misspelled, vocabulary.

Kissing him is really the only option left.

He makes a little desperate noise against her mouth, and then he’s finally kissing back. He’s not an aggressive kisser, but he is enthusiastic, his lips insistent and hungry against hers. And when he reaches up to cup her jaw and gently, oh so gently, tilt her head to better slot their mouths together, she falls apart, and time slips away.

When they eventually separate, she pants, “Hey, what do you say to taking this to the bedroom?”

Clark chokes on air. “I - I don’t think I’m comfortable, at this stage, I mean –”

“Relax,” she says as he flounders. “You just got stabbed. I’m not keen to start anything when it might end with you bleeding out on my floor *again.”* She gets to her feet. “Just to sleep. I swear. My mattress is way more comfortable than the couch.”

Clark’s eyes narrow.

“Swear on my Pulitzer, no funny business will go down tonight,” she says solemnly.

Clark rolls his eyes towards the ceiling. “I am going to regret this,” he says as he lets her haul him to a mostly upright position.

“Impossible.”

“Agree to disagree.”

“More importantly,” she says as they start down the hallway, “how does the cape come off? Clasps or zippers?”

He throws her a suspicious look.

She grins wolfishly. “Or is the whole suit more of a onesie situation?”

“Lois!”

End Notes

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